

## The Rise and Fall

by LucianRaven

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Summary: The fall of the covenant empire was only the beginning, now mankind and the race of the Elites struggle to beat back a new threat, one with less reservations and a bloodthirsty nature...

## The Rise and Fall

Klari an'kama steadied herself as she looked down the sights of her newly acquired CSJ-2 energy sniper rifle. She was proud of the weapon, and rightly so for she had designed it. It incorporated covenant and human technology as well as some of her own custom-made parts. Capable of firing a tiny needle shaped laser at light speed, it was extremely lethal and extremely accurate, but the tiny spike had to penetrate a kill zone since it simply passed through the target it hit. She was a perfect an example of the Sanghelli as most males dared dream of and she stood still as a rock in her silver-rimmed deep purple combat armor. Down-range, her target, a small glowing light that blinked and moved back and forth behind an energy shield centered in the middle of her sight and she slowly started to squeeze the triggerâ€|

"Captainâ€|Captainâ€|sorry to interrupt you ma'am but we have a situation hereâ€|"

The gruff voice of Lieutenant Nicholas Kelling, her navigations officer, burst over the inter-ship intercom. The man still hadn't gotten use to calling her by her rightful title of Fleet-Master, but he was after all a marine. Sighing, she slung her rifle and left the firing range, her target shut down automatically as she patched her helmet's com-system through to the bridge and said, "I'm on my way."

Seven minutes later, Klari had traversed the intervening nine decks of the Righteous Flame. The cool purplish opalescent metal of the bridge door parted silently at her approach and all eyes turned to her as she stepped into the room.

"Officer on deck," yelled Sergeant Kevin Miller, and immediately the nine humans on the bridge snapped to attention. The fourteen Elites on the bridge had already bowed at her approach and the two grunts that were present lay on the floor for a brief moment. She considered them before nodding. They all relaxed and returned to their stations, all except Kelling who walked up to her, snapped to a crisp salute and said, "ma'am, at approximately 16:12 hours we were finishing a surface scan of the 4th planet in this system, Picus, when for a few minutes our scanners lost sign of a section of the system."

"Lieutenant, I am aware of the physics, what is your point?"

"Well, ma'am, you'd better take a look."

Kelling motioned at the largest of the monitor screens on the bridge. It displayed two of the four planets in the star system, then the sun and beyond that. The screen zoomed in automatically at Klari's squinting.

"What theâ€|?" she asked.

"Brute ships ma'am, lots of them and they are doing somethingâ€|funnyâ€|"

Klari could see what he meant; the ships had formed a ring with their noses facing inward and appeared to be glowing.

"Great one!" a startled Elite newly appointed to slip-space command blurted out "Great one! They are generating a slip-space tear!"

The tension grew as a dull, violent green field erupted from the center of the ring and from the center of that cameâ€|

"Good God!" muttered Josef Kutchk, a normally stoic man of obvious Russian descent. A huge ship, easily six times the length of the largest Sanghelli flagship and fully eight times the size of the Flame, appeared from the rent, which closed behind it. The ship appeared to be a freakish abomination; the hulls of at least twelve ships welded together and bristling with weapons. The ship had more guns than anything Klari had ever seen, but her honor would not permit her to fear.

"Shield us, Ok'any," she said, and the Elite at the control panel did so. Immediately the lighting on the bridge turned from a bright gold to a low cool teal.

"Ma'am," one of the humans said, "Ma'am we have finished the scan of the ship and â€|" he was stopped mid-sentence by one of the Sacred Defenders, called Honor Guards" by the humans.

The Defender had his energy-spear's tip millimeters from the man's throat and said in a low growl, "Questioning or adding to the Fleet Master's orders is punishable by death."

The air in the room seemed filled with static as Klari approached, and waved the guard away. The tension lessened as she said, "This is our way. You have similar ways but also many strange to us. If I wanted a scan I would ask. Our kind are required to know everything

about everything that we use and to use them wisely. Since you were unaware, there will be no consequences but when we battle, and we will enter the battle, I must know exactly what my ships are doing; is that understood?"

The man nodded and she looked around the room at everyone's faces.

"Now, firstly, tell me if the Brutes know they were scanned."

"Ma'am, I believe they do. The smaller ships are breaking off, charging weapons and I believe preparing to sweep the system. But I don't think they know where we are yet."

"Good, the element of surprise is not entirely gone from us. Make certain that the ship is running completely silent. Where does our trajectory take us?"

"Ma'am," replied Hans Kent, one of the Nav Techies, "we will, without engines, manage to break free of the gravity well of the planet, but our trajectory takes us within conventional firing range of the Bruteâ€¦cruiser; it'll be a long shot but we might make it."

There it was, finally it had been said. It was very possible, likely even, that if they stayed in the system they would fight and maybe die. Klari looked at her crew. The humans on deck seemed visibly to tense, but not from fear. She had seen this behavior before. It seemed to her that the more hopeless a situation got, the more those beings fought and all the fiercer for it. Her elites, on the other hand, smiled as they imagined the glorious battle ahead and she joined them for a moment. Hers was a race proud and strong, built to wage war and to win. But Klari did not have her luxury of dreaming for long and said, "tell me of the Brute ship."

An hour later, Klari was sitting in her chair on the bridge with her legs crossed and playing absentmindedly with a meditation sphere in her right hand. Outwardly she was calm, but inside her mind burned with activity. The ship; it was something unreal. What she had previously taken as twelve hulls was in fact twice that, with the difference being scavenged entirely for armor and weapons only. The scan had revealed twelve plasma turrets, three lances, 1,215 archer missile batteries, seventeen mac turrets, and a strange new array of unfamiliar weaponry that must have been new. The radiation signatures of the ship revealed no less than ten fusion coil generators and seven signatures marked with "FenRis" nuclear warhead signatures. The number of combined human and covenant point defense turrets would reduce even incoming asteroids to dust. The armor on the hull was crude and basically a patchwork of welding but the combined effect was twenty-two solid meters of titanium A and seven of \_Shagonic\_, the chosen covenant bio-metallic alloy. The shield system, generated by twelve generators in the core of the ship, covered it in a shield three times a standard destroyer. It was a behemoth of such magnitude that she could only guess it had taken years to make and some sort of facility she could only dream of.

The time had come. For three hours Klari and her crew of seventeen-thousand soldiers and three-thousand support crew had drifted dead in space, at times passing within a few thousand meters

of the crude Brute ships still searching the system. Now she stood before the huge main display screen looking at the enormous Brute cruiser. The cruiser was now almost close enough to fire at the Flame and was already too large to fit the view screen. Four people stood in a line four abreast behind her, two elites and two humans, "no," she thought, "no, twenty-thousand people stand behind me, and all of them willing to die for her, for their cause." She turned and faced the men.

She said simply, "Report."

Her second in command, a large well-built Elite, named Gura Te'Kall, stepped forward, his bright gold armor fit him like the armor of a god. He wore its massive weight like a vest of silk.

"Ma'am," he began, "Ma'am, the ship is sound. All of our systems have checked out and everyone is alert and ready. All four of the generators are at 100 functionality and both of the AI's have been booted and are online. The Pilots are ready, as is the crew."

She nodded and he stepped back. He and the human man next to him, Dirk Keyes, were in charge of making sure that the ship was made ready for battle. She knew it would be, before they had spoken. The Righteous Flame had shields capable of withstanding a single round from an Orbital MAC; it had seven plasma lances, thirty-two archer batteries, and two conventional plasma turrets whose sole purpose was to generate plasma for the lances, empowering them and enabling them to recharge faster. The humans had also installed four MAC guns, one of which was a special triple-shot model. Her armor was triple that of a UNSC Heavy Destroyer and yet even with this ship, the first of its kind, she was out-gunned. She could have slaughtered the nineteen Brute ships without question, but the monster in her path could erase her in a moment. She looked at Brigadier General Taturso Mikona, he and Kelgey Tur'tanta, the Elite next to him, were in charge of the soldiers. Taturso stepped forward and began to talk.

"Fleet master," he began, he was the only human who used her true title, and "The troops are restless. They want action and can hardly wait to see if they will engage the enemy. A pace battle is not a soldier's fight but a pilot's; and the men long for dirt and blood beneath their boots."

Klari looked at the four of them and said, "good, prepare in case we board or are boarded. Send a super-encrypted cestographer with a message to both fleet-command on Earth and to Sangel. Set the IBS for both at seven. Also, target the three nearest Brute destroyers with an energy lance each, with the remaining four targeting the Brute Cruiser. Target the MAC Rounds, all of them, at the cruiser as well. Flip the reactors at 2001 and prepare three slip-space portals worth of charge and divert enough power to keep them open.

Her weapons officer looked at her and said, "ma'am, who do we target on the cruiser?"

After a moment of hesitation, Klari spoke, "compromise as many decks as possible and if can, damage air locks and life support systems."

The humans present became suddenly stiffer and she could feel their disgust; the Elites despised her action but saw why she had to make

it.

The weapons officer said, "Ma'am, with all due respect, are you asking me to â€|toâ€|?"

Klari barked, "to do your duty, soldier! Yes, I'm asking you to push a damn button and try to kill as many people as you can! To fire on an unsuspecting enemy and not only stab him in the shadows but place your knife in his heart! There is no honor in what we are about to do and there is no explaining it away, but murdering this enemy in his sleep will save the lives of millions and if you find yourself unwilling to commit to the point of your moral unease, you may leave the bridge."

The soldier looked as though he had been smacked and was obviously angry, but he held his tongue and accepted what he had already known to be true. She thought for a moment, was it Christian? Yes, Christian Keats was the man's name, he was a good soldier.

"Kelling!" she said, "Kelling, when we come out of cloak, and after we fire, I want a slip-space portal in front of us, exit coordinates to right behind the enemy cruiser and I want those portals held open and us out of the way, clear? I also want a set-jump for in system, just beyond the 3rd planet."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She continued, "Keats! When we go through the portal I want another volley of plasma and MAC rounds, the MAC shells and archer pods, A-F at the Cruiser, and a lance each for the seven nearest frigates. The point defense can engage enemy craft and missiles at will."

All was ready, her ship, like a primed grenade, was ready to be released was tightly wound and ready to explode on her unsuspecting foe. And all that was left was for her to say one little word.

"Mark," she said, barely above a whisper but clearly heard on the silent bridge.

Her ship was instantly a raging fury of destruction, as it materialized in the visible spectrum accompanied by six super-dense tungsten carbide ships and seven bright lances of plasma. Of the three lances that targeted frigates, two hit the ships fusion cores and they exploded like tiny silent novas; the third was cut in half sideways and drifted like a gutted fish at sea, while spinning and venting atmosphere. The four other lances first targeted the same area, burning on the shield for a moment before finally shorting it out and carving into the hull. But too much of their power was expended on the shield and they didn't do much. The MAC rounds that followed the lasers had a much greater effect and since the shields were down, they crushed through several decks, the triple shot cannon actually managed to tear a hole through the ship entirely, however the ship itself barely shuddered. Almost instantly its weaponry was ready to fire, so fast that Klari barely had time to yell, "Jump! No! Jump!"

She expected to die, and was determined to stand and meet it. As the enemy lasers prepared to fire, she was actually surprised to see the

slip-space hole open before her.

As the Brute Cruiser fired and filled the space before it with plasma and metal, its target the Righteous Flame slipped through a portal. Curiously it was a portal that remained open. The ship reappeared almost instantly behind the cruiser, through its exit portal, which also remained open, and turned immediately off at an angle and accelerated warming its turrets as it went. The Brute crew of the Savage Revenge began at once to turn their massive ship and had just managed to present their broadside to the portal when seventeen white-hot MAC Slugs, accompanied by a cloud of demagnetizing plasma streaked out of it. It only took Kerchalli Maganta a moment to figure out what had happened. The clever sangeili she-witch had tricked him into sending his own shells into the slip-space and hitting his own ship in a maneuver that he would later relay to the Brute High Council, and would consequently never be successfully executed again. The Brute captain ordered his crew to ignore the rounds and fire 200 of his archer pods, and one of the specially modified nukes and the side of the ship was partially obscured by the smoke of over a hundred-thousand trails of missile exhaust.

Klari was in trouble and she knew it. She had cut it too close as she went into slip-space and the demagnetizing plasma had damaged a few of her ships systems, including her shields and plasma lances. She had only one hope and it was quickly dashed. The MAC shells hit the Brute vessel and bent the entire ship into a v-shape but only four shells made it through and as the Brutes let loose a volley of missiles. She knew that a second salvo would be impossible...

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